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The Ethics of Industrial Publishing

By HENRY H. NORRIS

Managing Editor, Electric Railway Journal

WITHIN twenty-five years past the publishing of that type of class periodicals known as industrial papers has grown to be a business of large proportions. While exact statistics are not available, the volume of annual business is at least \$50,000,000 and more than 1,400 publications are issued. These are mainly of two varieties: trade or merchandising papers and technical papers, but there are others of a more general character while still lying within the industrial field.

PECULIAR NATURE OF INDUSTRIAL PUBLISHING

The publishing of business papers differs in many particulars from newspaper publishing. While their essential functions of gathering, disseminating and interpreting information are the same, the relation between the publishers on the one hand, and their subscribers and advertisers on the other, is not the same. The industrial publication reaches a class of readers who have special trade or technical interests, and it serves them along the lines of these interests. The newspapers are addressed to readers of many kinds and with a wide range of interests. Every worthwhile industrial publication, therefore, occupies a position as teacher and leader to a group of specialists, which is small in number compared with the subscription lists of the newspapers and general magazines of similar standing.

Because the clientele of the business paper is small, the range being roughly two thousand to twenty times that number, the publisher and his staff can maintain intimate contact with

their circle of readers. In fact, such a relation must be maintained if the efforts of their publication are to succeed. He and his associates are active and occupy leading positions in the industrial organizations in the field of their paper, and they spend much of their time in visiting the important centers of activity in their specific industry. As a result they are personally acquainted with large numbers of their subscribers, including practically all of those who are leaders of thought and action among them.

The relation of the business paper publisher to his advertisers is also an intimate one. The publisher is in a position to sense the marketing and even the production problems of the advertisers, due to the necessarily wide scope of his vision of the particular industry which they are trying to serve with their products. He thus can advise as to the form and matter of advertising copy, as well as the general features of advertising campaigns and detail plans.

The intimate relation which exists between the business paper publisher and his clientele has rendered desirable, and in fact necessary, a special code of ethics to cover his case. Not only is this true for the reasons already explained, but also, and particularly, because there is a close relation between the editorial and advertising columns of his paper. The editorial and advertising departments are fundamentally addressed to the same people, for the same purpose. This is to enable the subscribers to do their work better and more economically. Thus, when a highway paper explains editorially how to build a satisfactory roadway,

its advertising columns carry the message of the manufacturers and dealers who are prepared to supply the apparatus necessary for the building of a highway, of the engineers who are expert in highway building, of book publishers who issue treatises on highway construction, of contractors and communities who require men to do the higher grades of work in this field, and many others who need to be brought into touch with possible customers.

ESSENTIAL INDEPENDENCE OF EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING COLUMNS

This parallelism between the editorial and advertising functions of the business paper involves coöperation between the corresponding departments of the paper, but not collusion for the purpose of giving an advertising tinge to the editorial columns. A danger with respect to the latter does exist and it is a serious one. The existence of this danger has, in fact, been the primary cause of the development of a special code of ethics for business publishers. And a further reason for a code of ethics is that advertisers and subscribers may know that the publishers adhere to high standards which, among other things, prevent improper use being made of the editorial columns.

Of course, the actual editorial standards of reputable business papers have long prohibited the insertion of disguised advertising material such as "puffs," "write-ups" and the like. The terms connote to the editorial mind a group of highly undesirable types of article. However, all editors have not applied the principle to an equal degree and a few papers have not appreciated the extent to which their best success depends upon complete independence of the editorial and advertising columns. The papers which have adhered to higher standards

have been in the majority for many years, but they have not attempted to formulate a code of principles until within a few years past because they have had no way of functioning as an industry. The fact is that industrial publishing has recognized itself as an industry for less than two decades. Before this, although individual papers were provided to meet the needs of different branches of industry, they, like the branches of industry with which they were identified, thought of themselves as isolated units. Gradually, however, industry began to find itself as a national affair and, under the same centripetal forces which have been drawing the several branches of industry together, the related business papers have been drawn together in national organizations. These organizations have been formed to assist in the solution of common problems, to enable the publishers to stand together where their rights and privileges were involved, and to permit the codification of guiding principles which will tend to elevate the standards of service of industrial publications.

TWO POINTS OF VIEW IN BUSINESS PUBLISHING

One of the salient problems connected with self-improvement in this business has been to determine the point of view from which industrial papers should be published. One might as well frankly face the fact that there were, and are still, two radically different points of view. From one, industrial publishing is considered primarily as a business, the service feature being secondary or incidental. The other point of view is that in which the principal stress is laid on service to the industry in all its various phases, the advertising being included as part of the service. In this case, the profits of the business

are considered somewhat of a by-product, the conviction of the publisher being, however, that good service, intelligently placed from the business standpoint, will be sure to receive financial reward. Essentially, these two points of view in business publishing are the same as those which are met in the individual citizen in everyday life. After all, what the publisher and the individual have to sell is fundamentally service.

There is reason, of course, behind both of these points of view, and there is not so much difference between them as might appear at first sight. The difference while small is, however, vital. It is one of emphasis. Thus the attitude of one publisher says, "the profits first," even if his words are different. That of the other says, "the reader first," whether he subscribes to a creed which formulates his attitude or not. The latter is the modern, progressive industrial publisher. He is the one who has been forward in the movement to raise the standards of the business.

From what has been said, the reasons underlying the formulation of "Standards of Practice for Business Papers"¹ may be inferred. As publishers got together in their local and national associations to discuss their problems, they felt the need for some yardstick by which to measure their own performance along ethical lines. Their idea was not to produce a police code which would permit the bringing of transgressors before the bar of industrial publishing justice, but rather to draw an outline of what industrial publishing is at its best. The "code" has been accepted in the spirit in which it was drawn and, in the opinion of leading publishers in this field, is accomplishing its purpose. A glance through any good industrial paper today will dis-

close little material in the editorial columns that bears the mark of disguised advertising, and little in the advertising pages that is extravagant in claim or derogatory of competitors.

THE ASSOCIATED BUSINESS PAPERS, INCORPORATED

So much by way of a background for the "Standards of Practice." Let us now examine briefly the organization which is promulgating them, the Associated Business Papers, Incorporated. This is the outgrowth of a movement of the industrial publishers to get together nationally, which in 1906 took the form of the Federation of Trade Press Associations in the United States. As the name of that organization indicates, there were already a number of local publishers' associations extant. These had been formed from time to time to bring together the men engaged in this branch of the publishing business for the purpose of exchanging views and experience, at the same time enabling them to take a united stand where such action would be helpful to the industries which they represented and to their own individual industry as well.

At its annual convention in 1913 the Federation adopted a "Declaration of Trade Press Principles,"² ten in number, which set forth frankly just what business publishing was trying to do and what the publishers believed to be the essentials of good service. Good service, the "Principles" stated to be the basis on which every trade paper should build its business. Such was a beginning which led naturally to the "Standards of Practice" which were adopted by the Federation in May, 1914, and were taken over by its successor, the Associated Business Papers, Incorporated. This, the present association, was formed in

¹ See Appendix, page 296.

² Reprinted on page 295.

1916, because the Federation proved to be too unwieldy and loosely articulated an organization for the purpose of securing results in reasonable time.

The new association, however, built upon the foundation laid by its predecessor, and adopted as one of its requirements of membership a policy of strict adherence to the "Standards of Practice." The association is not yet all-inclusive by any means, but this does not necessarily imply that papers not included in its membership are not willing to subscribe to the "Standards of Practice." Most of them, indeed, could easily satisfy the association on this score. It is significant, however, that a prominent requirement for membership in the "A. B. P." is acceptance of the code. This fact gives to the code the weight of authority and also establishes the reputation of the Associated Business Papers, Incorporated, as an organization which maintains high standards.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the British Association of Trade and Technical Journals also has adopted "Standards of Practice"³ which are fundamentally the same in spirit as those of the American association, although differing in phraseology. This action of the British publishers and the wording of their "Standards" indicate that the problems of industrial publishing are much the same on both sides of the Atlantic.

THE "STANDARDS OF PRACTICE"

The "Standards of Practice for Business Papers" of the American association are ten in number and characterized by their brevity and practicality. They do not go into the philosophy of their subject but are confined to telling what to do under all circumstances involving ethical considerations.

³ Reprinted in full on page 297.

The "Standards" begin with the statement that the business paper is to be published primarily in the interests of the subscriber. This simple principle will serve as a basis of settlement of many of the trying problems which arise in the business. While the subscriber pays probably not more than 10 per cent of the cost of issuing the paper, the whole paper is addressed to him. The advertiser is willing to furnish the other nine-tenths of the cost for the privilege of reaching him. This money is well spent, for the industrial paper reaches a definite class of readers who are interested in the product of the advertiser. The circulation of the paper is selective, in that the paper is subscribed for, and read by people who are looking for specialized information. Thus, while in the editorial columns there is nothing which savors of advertising, the editorials and articles are directing the thought of the subscribers along lines which will make them interested readers of advertising also, if they need apparatus or service. In this way a paper, while serving the reader first, also serves the advertiser. And, obviously, it owes service of the proper kind to the advertiser who is paying most of the bills.

The second of the "Standards" calls for truth and honesty in all departments. This may seem trite, but the responsibility of a business paper for the character of the statements made in its columns and in its name by its representatives, is so great that public commitment to this principle is desirable as an acknowledgment of this responsibility.

A logical sequel to this need for truth is that for a distinct line of demarcation between facts and opinion in the paper. This need is recognized in the third "Standard," which is, of course, the rule in journalism

generally. The selection of a writer, outside the staff or within it, to prepare articles on definite subjects involving the expression of opinion is naturally guided by the feeling of the editor that such expression is needed. But opinion must be expressed in the author's name, or in the department of the paper clearly designated for that purpose. This practice safeguards the paper as well as the subscriber.

"PUFFS" AND "WRITE-UPS"

At one time the publication of "puffs" and "write-ups" in business papers was common, these terms being used to designate articles which were inserted at the instigation of the interests supposed to be benefited by the insertion. Advertising space was sometimes sold with the understanding that the advertiser and his wares would be mentioned in the editorial columns of the paper. The evils of the practice were early recognized and papers of the better class refused to print such material, pointing out that as the interests of the subscriber were the ruling consideration, no articles could be accepted which did not contain news of interest to him. The growing custom of refusing to print "write-ups" was embodied in the fourth rule of the "Standards of Practice." This rule does not imply that descriptions of manufactured devices and names of manufacturers are barred from the editorial columns. So to do would lessen the value of the paper to the reader, for it is as important to let him know that new and practical devices and services are available, as it is to furnish him with the general principles which should guide him. To be sure the person who is prepared to furnish the device or service is also a beneficiary of such editorial mention, but he is entitled to be so, provided that his benefit is a

by-product and not the purpose of the publication. Under these circumstances an article of the kind mentioned should not be stigmatized as a "write-up." It stands on its literary and technical or trade merits in comparison with the other articles in the paper.

The fifth of the "Standards" relates to the contents of the advertising columns, which must, in their way, conform to certain definite requirements, although, of course, the publisher cannot exert the control in detail here that he can in the editorial section of the paper. However, when an advertiser signs a contract for advertising service he does so with the understanding that the advertisements are to be consistent with the interests of the reader and the rights of other advertisers. While the publisher cannot guarantee the reader against loss through following the suggestions contained in an advertisement, he does assume a degree of responsibility. The reputation of the paper is to some extent behind every advertisement printed. With relation to other advertisements in the same or related lines, each piece of copy must stand on its own feet and not try to magnify the merits of what it describes at the expense of competitors.

The list of "Standards" begins with those relating to the interests of the subscriber and the need for truth and honesty in general. In the sixth "Standard" these begin to be more specific, in that subscriptions and advertising are specified to be solicited solely on the merit of the publication. Such a rule implies a tendency the other way, namely to use influences other than the compelling force of data to "get the name on the dotted line" of the contract. The best papers, nowadays, rely upon close study of the business possibilities in

their fields to furnish facts upon which advertising can be intelligently placed. They further supply accurate circulation statistics, classified in accordance with the needs of individual advertisers, so that the latter can visualize their prospective audiences. The necessity for doing this is epitomized in the seventh rule of the "Standards."

The remaining three "Standards" have to do with the large questions of competition and coöperation. They are evidence of the consciousness on the part of the publisher that he does not live to himself, and his subscribers and advertisers alone; that he is a part of industry and of society. They set for him a high standard in stating that he is "to determine what is the highest and largest function of the field which he serves, and then to strive in every legitimate way to promote that function."

THE BUSINESS EDITORS' CODE

All of the foregoing relates to the code of ethics of the publisher, who of course determines all of the policies of the paper, both editorial and commercial. The editors of business papers, in addition, are finding it desirable to prepare codes of their own. This movement is quite recent, dating back only to last summer when the Editorial Conference of the New York Business Publishers' Association adopted such a code, with the title "Standards of Editorial Practice."⁴ This is an elaboration of the editorial parts of the publishers' code, and makes more specific certain of its features which are only suggested therein.

This editors' code contains only seven "Standards" of which the first four are substantially like those of the publishers' code. The two following relate to the taking of a position of editorial leadership in the industry

served, with a view to bringing it to higher levels of achievement, and to the support in the paper of such worthy measures of public interest as their importance justifies. These principles are in line with the strong convictions of leading editors that their papers must be positive forces in industry and not merely recorders of what has taken place. They are an expression of the realization that the occupancy of a vantage point from which the industrial developments can be viewed in perspective, places on the shoulders of the editors a weight of responsibility for telling their readers what they see. The fact that they reach large numbers of readers who place implicit confidence in what they say gives these editors an influence which they should use in the correction of wrong tendencies and the development of correct ones.

In these "Standards" of the editorial code there is the implication that a paper which is to succeed in this field must be one which takes the initiative, and it is a fact that some of the good things that have been done in recent years in industry can be credited in large part to the efforts of the industrial press editors.

The last "Standard" in the New York editors' code has to do with the editorial interrelations of business papers. It simply illustrates the principle of the square deal as applied to this department, by insisting that borrowed articles shall be credited to the original source and that unfair competition shall be avoided.

The brevity and simplicity of this New York code are in marked contrast to the excellent but elaborate code adopted a few weeks ago by the Oregon State Editorial Association,⁵ which is said to have hit what is probably the highest note that has been sounded in American journalism.

⁴ Reprinted in full on page 296.

⁵ Reprinted in full, page 283.

This code is evidence that newspapermen are striving along the same general directions of ethical progress as the industrial paper editors. The Oregon Code covers the following characteristics of good journalism: sincerity, truth, care, competency, thoroughness, justice, mercy, kindness, moderation, conservatism, proportion, public service and social policy. The words listed epitomize the code, which has within it the whole philosophy of the profession, but which needs to be accompanied by a simplified version that can be read quickly and readily committed to memory.

ENFORCEMENT OF CODES FOR INDUSTRIAL PUBLISHING

Before closing, a word regarding the enforcement of the codes of ethics in industrial publishing seems needed to round out the subject. These codes are not police codes, as was pointed out earlier. However, as acceptance of them is a condition of membership in associations of industrial publishers, some way of rendering them effective in accomplishing their purpose is necessary.

The Associated Business Papers, Incorporated, has a Committee on Trade Practices, which receives and acts upon complaints of code violations. The causes of these complaints, however, can usually be removed by means of informal conferences under the auspices of the association's officers. The association also has a Committee on Standardization, which is endeavoring to outline practices in accordance with the code where questions arise affecting groups of papers. Further, the publications of the members are examined from time to time by a Committee of Editors, to detect violations of the code. The carrying out of all of this work is, of course, simplified by the watchfulness of competing papers

with regard to each other's practices.

But, undoubtedly, the strongest influence in causing the business papers to adhere to the code, aside from their inherent desire to do so, is that their membership in the association publicly commits them to such adherence. When a paper is accepted for membership, it prints a full-page statement to this effect and includes the "Standards of Practice," so that there may be no doubt as to what the paper has undertaken to do. Moreover, to be admitted at all, a paper must already have established a reputation for fair dealing.

The New York Business Publishers' Association also has a committee to consider complaints of violation of their editorial code. This committee at present is not taking the initiative in the matter but stands ready to exert its influence to remedy any conditions which seem to justify such complaints.

CONCLUSION

The fact that the business paper publishers and editors, as well as the newspaper publishers and editors, are codifying the ethics of their business and profession indicates that this business and this profession have reached a state of development where there is a wealth of experience to be conserved and given tangibility. Only thus are creeds formulated, and a code of ethics is essentially a creed.

Coming back to the "Standards of Practice" of the Associated Business Papers, Incorporated, it may be well to point out that these serve several practical ends. They enable the publisher of the weak paper to determine wherein the weakness lies and to eliminate it, if this is possible. They stimulate the publisher of the strong paper to analyze his practices in order to detect the faults which prevent it from being even stronger. They safeguard all publishers against demands for

special privileges in their papers and enable them to explain to the subscriber and the advertiser who do not understand the fundamentals of industrial publishing just why their requests cannot be granted. In addition, they have

an educational mission to the young people coming up in the business, who need to know why some practices are followed and others are frowned upon in the publishing houses with which they are connected.